

Philosophic Exchange

Volume 2

Number 1 *Volume 1, Number 2, Summer 1971*

Article 14

1971

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Rabkin, Gerald (1971) "The Conventions of Film: A Response to Professor Sparshott," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 14.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol2/iss1/14

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**THE CONVENTIONS OF FILM:
A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR SPARSHOTT**
by
Gerald Rabkin

Since as long ago as 1915 when Vachel Lindsay analyzed the art of the infant "moving picture," critics have been attempting to define the unique esthetic properties of film. Here was, and is, a form specifically expressive of modern technology, and yet one which has notoriously ransacked all the art forms which preceded it. The "impurity" of film, if not unique — theatre, opera, and ballet are also dependent upon the collaboration of various arts — is nonetheless particularly disturbing. For the enormous social impact of the medium forced recognition of a phenomenon which could only be termed "mass art," a phenomenon quite distinct from anything which had preceded it. Surely something beyond the portability of film, something intrinsic to its own formal capabilities, had bred the universality of its esthetic triumph.

In what did its power reside? As soon as it found its walking legs film dug deeply into the bag of existing narrative and dramatic forms. Once the thrill of seeing photographs move had passed, once the amazement at Lumiere's actualities had dimmed, audiences demanded the continuities of narrative — character, plot, scene — they had learned to accept from fiction and drama. Early films relied heavily, in truncated form, on the subject matter of the Victorian novel and melodrama. These early one and two reelers strike us as quaint, static, and theatrical in the worst way, but they demonstrate the accuracy of McLuhan's observation that a new art form encapsulates the subject matter of its predecessors. Even after the achievement of film vocabulary, the discovery of the potentialities of the moving camera and montage, the peculiar qualities of film space and time (of which Professor Sparshott has so many illuminating comments to make), the subject matter of the feature film — still the dominant cinematic form — tends to be that of fiction and drama. As Pauline Kael has wryly noted: "Film theorists often say that film art is, 'by its nature,' closest to painting and music, but all these years movie companies haven't been buying paintings and symphonies to adapt, they've been buying plays and novels."

And yet the film is clearly and definitively *not* theatre or fiction. If it shares with theatre the characteristics of performance and the circumstances of viewing, it possesses a scope of visual reference that theatre cannot possibly approach, a fluidity that can and does range the concrete world of reality and the conjured worlds of the imagination. But it pays the price of the absence of direct human contact, the instant transmission of energy from real performers to real audience. If it shares the narrative freedom of fiction, the openness of form, it communicates this freedom through means primarily visual not verbal. Yes, clearly the film has affinities with the other arts: it shares with painting and photography the balance of line, tone, and shape within a defined frame; it shares with music its existence in time, the capacity to evoke emotion by the counterpoint of its formal elements.

THE CONVENTIONS OF FILM: A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR SPARSHOTT

All these interlocking affinities have been continually pursued in hope of isolating the unique source of film energy. The critical stress has shifted in various cycles: the socially-conscious critics of the thirties and the forties stressed literary-narrative questions of theme, content, social utility; the John Ford of *The Grapes of Wrath* was greatly preferred to the John Ford of *My Darling Clementine*. The auteurists have noted how individual thematic continuities have been embedded in cinematographic style: image, composition, camera movement. And the underground film culturists have consistently denigrated narrative elements in favor of the film's capacity for the expression of abstract imagery.

All this is, I hope, a not irrelevant response to what Professor Sparshott has investigated in his perceptive essay. For he too confronts the perennial question of film criticism: why do we derive from such an impure, collaborative medium the sensation of something unique? If his answer, from my point of view, overly concentrates on film's photographic roots to the slighting of its other esthetic affinities, it is nonetheless refreshingly openminded, surely a welcome antidote to the strident personality-mongering so characteristic of contemporary film criticism. His analysis is most effective when it is most precise, when he contrasts how we physically perceive the world the filmmaker creates with the world of everyday reality. When he moves into the wider implications of illusion, reality, dream I have some hesitations, but these are, I think, hesitations he himself shares. I should like, therefore, to examine, rather than challenge, just a few of the themes of this evocative essay in a spirit of mutual exploration.

Reality, illusion, vision, dream — the bread-and-butter concepts of philosophical and literary discourse — happily used in this essay with a precision often absent on the wilder shores of film criticism. "Antonioni's vision exploits the illusory nature of human relationships within a context which affirms the dream-like structure of reality." I just made that up, but it might have come from any of a number of contemporary critics. Professor Sparshott is more precise: if film is, in his words, "by definition an art of illusion," he carefully distinguishes between levels of illusion: "the primary illusion whereby an apparently moving image is engendered on a screen," and the secondary illusion, the "conviction of reality" which the moving image engenders in turn. He takes no sides in the quarrel between the "realists" and the "fantasists," those who champion respectively the film's capacity to celebrate and redeem the physical world (Siegfried Kracauer being its prime exponent), and those who affirm the film's fantasy-creating potentiality. He sagely notes that the two positions are in fact complementary, that the film "tells the best truths and the best lies too." But he does ultimately affirm that "there is a sense in which a film can and often does make you believe in the reality of what you see in a way a play never does." Yes, and there is another sense in which a play makes you believe in the reality of what you see — and hear and smell — in a way a film never does. The performers are, after all, "real" in the literal sense that film performers can never be.

I make the comparison to point out the ambiguities which inevitably surround questions of esthetic "realism." No concept has been so commonly used or more frequently abused. Consider the antitheses it suggests in various disciplines: nominalism, romanticism, expressionism, presentationalism, abstraction. All art is

GERALD RABKIN

dependent upon man's sense of "reality," but "realism" as a specific esthetic doctrine is little more than a century old. Yet even "realism" is dependent upon artistic convention and thus is in varying degrees false to our direct experience of the world. When we examine naturalistic novels and dramas of the late nineteenth century we are often struck by how "unreal" they seem, how dependent they are on the literary conventions of their age. Ibsen's realistic dramas, which strove to rip the lid off bourgeois society and reveal the ugly reality beneath, now seem clearly anchored in the conventions of the well-made play, full of contrivance and melodrama; their "reality" transcends their "realism." Zola, Norris, Dreiser — all are clear products of a specific literary sensibility. The history of art reveals that one generation's formal experimentation becomes the next generation's tradition, and last year's reality becomes this year's cliché.

Similarly in film. In *La Chinoise* Godard asserts in serious perversity that Melies, the early master of film magic and illusion, was in fact a greater realist than Lumiere, the documenter of everyday life. Lumiere's subjects, he argues, were painterly ones fashionable with the Impressionists; Melies, on the other hand, transformed the cinema into a Brechtian newsreel and thus came closer to reality and modernity through artifice than Lumiere did through literal reproduction. Godard's paradox appeals to a reality greater than formal documentation. But even our sense of film's capacity to transmit faithfully events enacted before it has changed. Sparshott asserts that "film has a strong though not irresistible bias toward its simplest form, that in which the projector repeats a camera event." Yet it was precisely for these reasons that Griffith was told that audiences would never accept the interruption of film scenes by crosscutting or the disembodied images of faces or hands floating imperiously in the darkness of the movie house.

The question generally obscured is whether esthetic realism is viewed rather as a style or an achievement. If all art involves artifice, the useful question we can ask is how artistic conventions work: whether they contrive in their various ways to have us accept what is portrayed as images of verisimilitude ("That's the way things are, man, that's the way things really are"); or whether we are asked to accept conventions which affirm the artifice of their genre. Many contemporary plays, for example, exploit the fact that they are taking place in a theatre. Artistic success or failure bears no necessary relation to the stylistic realism of film or any other medium; and most contemporary art forms possess diverse capacities for communicating convincing images of reality. Fiction, for example, has world enough and time to build up an accretion of detail intolerable in other forms. Film adaptations of Dickens' novels inevitably present a mere corner of his rich tapestry. Theatre has the living performer, and film has the photographic image. In short, not only do I remain unconvinced that film possesses a peculiar power to make us believe in the "reality" we see on the screen, I do not feel that this reality is necessarily artistically desirable.

I fear that I may have made Professor Sparshott sound like a Kracauerian defender of film's "redemption of reality," which he decidedly is not. He affirms the paradox that the conviction of film reality lies in how it forces us to accept "as perceptually normal a world that never takes on the aspect of everyday reality." The conviction — the reality — of the individual image, he claims, enables us to

THE CONVENTIONS OF FILM: A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR SPARSHOTT

accept severe formal discontinuities. Film's "closest analogy," he writes, "seems to be with dreaming."

The difficulty with judging this analogy between our dream experience and the "alienated vision" of film lies in the extreme subjectivity of the former. We all experience dreams in intensely personal ways. As we have retreated from the brilliant but imprecise formulations of Freudianism, we recognize that we know precious little about the nature of dreaming, that dream physiology is in its infancy. For example, it has been observed that nightmares can be physiologically distinguished from anxiety dreams in that they usher forth from the deep rather than the REM stage of sleeping, but beyond this observation there is no objective comparative data. Since our dream perception is so imprecise, it has been suggested that our sense of dreaming is often scripted from our social and esthetic expectations. Karen Horney has noted that patients in Freudian analysis tend to have Freudian dreams and Jungian patients Jungian ones. Hence the importance of art in giving structure and meaning to dreaming. What I am suggesting, therefore, is rather than film approximating the experience of dreaming, perhaps we order our dreams to conform to social and esthetic patterns.

What do you find dreamlike? Do you dream in color or black and white? Which film dream sequences convince? The terror-laden, high contrast visions of Bergman in *Wild Strawberries* and *Hour of the Wolf*? The slow motion violence of Bunuel's *Los Olvidados*? The Freudian landscapes of Hitchcock's *Spellbound*, Pabst's *Secrets of a Soul*, or Sjöberg's *Miss Julie*? In most cases, I think we judge the sequence less by its fidelity to our experience of dreaming than by our sense of whether or not it is stylistically consistent with the filmmaker's esthetic need in a particular film.

Perhaps a sequence or an entire film seems dreamlike, whether or not it is consciously intended as such. Again, the judgment tends to be intensely subjective. Many have found Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* and Fellini's *Satyricon* to contain vivid dream imagery. But both films seem too literary and self conscious to evoke the unsummoned but disturbing imagery I associate with dreaming. The empty DeChirico landscape of the latter part of *L'Avventura*, the mysterious cropdusting attack on Cary Grant in *North By Northwest*, or, on another level, the surrealist Marxian War in *Duck Soup* are to me more dreamily evocative. The subjective camera alienates me from the dreamlike quality of a film's imagery, for it reinforces my sense of the filmmaker's conscious intrusion. I stress my personal reactions because film criticism continually elevates subjectivity to objective description; we usually learn more about the film critic than the film. Professor Sparshott has largely avoided this difficulty by concentrating on our specific perceptions of film space, time, and motion. On these subjects he makes many trenchant observations. But when he writes that "my own spatial relationship to my dream worlds is like nothing in waking reality so much as it is like my relationship with film worlds," he is describing a personal analogy which I am not at all sure is universal. Until we learn more about the perception of dream imagery the analogy must remain extremely tentative.

The question of daydreams is just as complex, for here we face the intersection of personal and social fantasies and the eroding boundary of public toleration.

When Hollywood is referred to as the "dream factory," one thinks of the movies' capacity during its great era of, roughly, 1920-50 to give form to the collective daydreams of its age. The cult of nostalgia — the resurrection of old film stars in current Broadway vehicles, the underground celebration of the "superstar" even if in transvestite reincarnation, the late show devotees of Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, and Errol Flynn — reveals a yearning for a time when, despite depression and war, Hollywood ministered to the collective fantasies of an entire society. Despite the trauma of sound, genres and stars gradually emerged and endured. Cary Grant and John Wayne have survived almost forty years of changes in fashion; how long will Elliot Gould and Jack Nicholson last? The movie moguls, vulgar and egocentric as they were, knew their job: dream merchants.

But now the dream factory is largely manufacturing electronics, and what seemed a unique capacity of movies for myth-creating (see Parker Tyler's *The Hollywood Hallucination*) can be viewed in light of the social role the medium had come to play. As Hollywood as a concept has disappeared, as film has become more of an elitist art, its power to encapsulate social fantasy has also declined. The desperate trend-mongering of contemporary producers, hustling belatedly after the latest fashion in campus rebellion or sexual exploitation, reveals the fragmentation of the film audience and the society at large. My point is that the characteristics of any genre, its esthetic form and capabilities, are perennially refashioned by social and technological change.

One example of how these changes have altered film conventions will suffice: color, once a cumbersome and expensive process, for almost four decades evoked a super-real fantasy world reserved for spectacles, musicals, and westerns. Sparshott quotes Ustinov's remark about filming *Billy Budd* in black and white because it was more realistic than color. Similarly, Oliver rejected color, which he had used to such excellent effect in *Henry V*, in his film of *Hamlet* because of its non-tragic connotations. Yet today few films are made in anything but color because color equipment has become more mobile and the film must compete with as well as be marketable to color television. So no longer does the film audience accept the convention that color is less suitable to serious subjects than black and white. A naturalistic film like Loach's *Kes* or a political thriller like Costas-Gavras' *Z* is not only acceptable in color; it must be in color if it is to widely distributed. So much, therefore, for all the early theories about how we *see* reality with regard to color and black and white, that film color peculiarly evoked a super-real world. It was a convention, not an intrinsic characteristic of film perception.

I'll conclude by reaffirming that these discursive remarks are not intended as a refutation of Professor Sparshott's analysis but rather as a mutual exploration of treacherous terrain. I acquiesce in recognizing the film's potency, but I'm not sure it is a unique power. Man is an inventive species, as the history of his art reveals, and if his technological skills do not succeed in self-eradication, I am sure he will devise some new and even more splendid window on reality.